

Volunteering in the National Forests

by Chuck Flanagan

Have you ever thought how great it would be to have a free campsite (with Broken Top and Sparks Lake, Deschutes National Forest near Bend, OR full hook-ups) in a beautiful forest, surrounded by tall pines, and clear mountain lakes and streams? Well, it's not only possible, but easy and fun. Here's how we do it.

First, we prepare a short (one page) resume that highlights both of our work histories. We also prepare a standard cover letter that basically lays out our retired RV lifestyle; our desires concerning work (trails and recreation; we don't do bathrooms!), RV site needs, and the fact that we "have a well-behaved Golden Retriever."

Then we decide where we want to spend our time (summer or winter). That sounds easy, but it's a big country and there are opportunities everywhere.



Next, we look up the National Forest offices in that area. (We chose the National Forests because they are more dog tolerant, however, there are many agencies needing help.)

Then, I call and ask to speak to the "Volunteer Coordinator." Almost every office has one, and he/she knows what opportunities are available or will direct you to the staff member that needs volunteer help. (If there are no opportunities at that office he/she may direct you to a nearby office that does need help.) This

is your opportunity to talk your way into that great campsite. We try to show how our previous work experiences directly relate to the needs of the person we're talking with.

We immediately follow-up the call with a e-mailed copy of our short resume and cover letter.



Our first experience (in Bend, OR) took four calls and about 20 minutes to set up. That was the summer of 1997. One winter (January 1999) we decided to spend the cold months in the desert southwest. That took five calls to set up two assignments; both in Arizona (we ended up just outside of Phoenix).

The summer of 1999, we went back in Bend, OR; one call, directly to the guy we worked for in 1997. About 2 months ago, the ranger we worked for in Bend sent us an e-mail asking what we had planned for this coming summer. What

can I say? After a few e-mails and a phone call, we're going back to Bend for another great summer. Needless to say, once you've done one volunteer stint, the others come easier.

We prefer to work outside and try to contact the recreation staff at the forests. This summer, our primary assignment will be to hike and measure all of the non-motorized trails.

This means we have to hike them with a measuring wheel, take digital photos, and take GPS readings of certain features. We will also canoe in to remote campsites to measure them and take more GPS readings.

They also want us to help set up an interactive WEB site, with digital photos and maps of all the trails. This is what we like to do. Other volunteers serve as campground hosts, maintain trails, patrol trails (hike and/or bike) as *Field Rangers*, work in visitor centers, or perform other specialty work (biologists, computer specialists, botanists, foresters, etc.).

As I stated earlier, we prefer to volunteer with the National Forest Service. We have other RVing friends that volunteer with National Wildlife Refuges and the National Park Service. Regardless of which agency you pick, you can be sure of a rewarding experience and some great RVing locations.



How to find the job

Although there are several sources for volunteers/workers (Workamper News, for one), I think the best way to approach the Forest Service is to call the Forest Service offices where you'd like to work and ask to speak to the *Volunteer Coordinator*. All offices have someone handling this position (although sometimes as "Other duties as assigned").

Have an idea of what kind of work you are qualified and willing to do, as well as your needs (campsite, etc.). Even if there are no jobs available at that location, the coordinator can often steer you to another office that needs someone. Follow up immediately with a letter and resume.

Resources

Forest Service Volunteer positions: See *Web* site. See also the official government volunteer Web site.

Seasonal jobs: See Forest Service Web site for information and links.